

ETHNICITY IN THE USA: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODEL

[Editor's Note: This article is a condensed version of an article published in 1993 in the *Journal of Ethno-Development* 2(1). For a copy, write to Professor Cerroni-Long, Anthropology/Dept SAC, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI 48197. The Teachers Corner written for this issue of *Anthro.Notes* grew out of the author's research on ethnicity, summarized below.]

ETHNICITY AND CULTURE

As a born and bred Italian academically trained in the study of Japanese culture, I never encountered ethnicity as a major social phenomenon until I first visited Hawaii in 1975. Becoming exposed to ethnic diversity for the first time made me realize the great continuity of certain culturally-conditioned patterns of behavior, and the role these patterns play in keeping ethnic groups distinct and separate.

Visiting Hawaii after having spent several years in Japan made me particularly interested in the Japanese-Americans I came to know there. What immediately struck me was how their Japaneseness had been subtly transformed and reinforced. Being familiar with Japanese nonverbal behavior, I could see it reproduced faithfully, even if in a simplified form. What had changed, in some cases dramatically, was verbal communication, especially as a vehicle for the expression of values and beliefs. However, a recognizable Japanese behavioral style was very much present, and among in-group members the decoding of its underlying symbolic meaning seemed to proceed undisturbed by superimposed verbal disclaimers.

These observations considerably strengthened my belief that culture powerfully influences communication, and gave me some basic ideas about how to define ethnicity in relation to culture. If the original patterns of nonverbal behavior are maintained across generations of people born and raised in a culture different from their ancestral one, then perhaps these

patterns constitute a core of cultural behavioral styles that can serve as a key to understanding the dynamics of cultural membership and identity. Subsequent research experiences in Asia, England, and Italy confirmed this. No matter what level of assimilation an ethnic group achieves, its members go on displaying a very specific set of micro-behavioral patterns whose uniqueness is often unrecognized but which, nonetheless, catalyzes both self-identification and group cohesion. Furthermore, these patterns generate a recognizable behavioral style that can establish group boundaries when necessary.

Eventually, I decided to test these ideas by conducting first-hand research in a multicultural society and came to America to pursue this research through graduate training in anthropology. Ethnic diversity is not a peculiarly American phenomenon but the type of ethnic groups one finds here and the ideological definition of ethnicity developed within the context of American society warrant special attention.

Most ethnic groups I had previously studied in Asia and Europe had not experienced relocation. They lived in areas ancestrally theirs and the characteristics of the land they inhabited were very much part of their sense of uniqueness. The situation in the United States is different. With the exception of Native Americans and Mexicans originally living in what has now become the American Southwest, all of the American ethnic groups are the result of migration. Furthermore, as a consequence of the Civil Rights Movement and the nation-wide unrest of the 1960's and early 1970's, there has emerged in the United States a "minority group" ideology. Consequently, over the past twenty years, the cultural diversity of some ethnic groups has been officially recognized and institutionalized through a process of majority-defined incentives, such as affirmative action, for socio-economic advancement. Largely because of this process, ethnicity and minority status have become equated in the minds of many Americans.

RESEARCH APPROACH

During my research on ethnicity in America, I repeatedly found that Americans focused almost entirely upon ideas, and that many held the belief that since ideas change, individuals can continually reinvent themselves. However, I found that I could apply a complex set of micro-behavioral observation techniques, and document the retention of ethnic-specific behavioral styles across generations [see Teacher's Corner]. I was also able to document relevant commonalities in the behavior of people observed in random social settings, evidence of American expressive patterns that create the context and the foil for ethnic diversity.

MODEL OF ETHNICITY

The model of ethnicity I developed is an anthropological one, built upon a specific definition of cultural, ethnic, and subcultural membership, all seen within the context of a comparative, relativistic and self-reflective approach. This approach finds direct application in my "outsider perspective," in the avoidance of any judgmental stance about group-specific rights, and in the emphasis given to self-analysis as the best mechanism for understanding not only one's own cultural/ethnic identity but also the parameters of one's interaction with people of different heritages.

Once I began teaching using my anthropological model of ethnicity, the student response was exceedingly positive, gaining me prestigious teaching awards and increasing the number of anthropology majors in my department. What students appear to find most liberating in the anthropological approach to ethnicity is the acknowledgment that all ethnicity has a cultural content; it is this cultural content--and not groups' special rights--that determines ethnic diversity. Furthermore, there are aspects of one's behavior that can only be understood by tracing their ethnic origin, just as there are other behaviors that are shared by all those born and raised within American culture. However, I have come to the conclusion that the success of

this model in my classroom may depend on some reasons quite unrelated to its intellectual quality. These reasons include the fact that I am a foreigner, that the model has no connection with current American orthodoxy on multiculturalism, and that I do not so much teach about ethnicity as teach ethnicity. Indeed, what may be most useful about this anthropological model is its avoidance of the confrontational premise of so much of the current debate about multiculturalism that focuses on self-definition, on the one hand, and diversity management, on the other.

THE MULTICULTURALISM DEBATE

The national debate over multiculturalism, in general, and multicultural education, in particular, has contributed little to the solution of inter-ethnic tension in the USA. Despite numerous articles, debates, campus conferences and forums, the very term multiculturalism has come to signify all sorts of things to all sorts of people, while its literal meaning has become lost. This is a pity, because the reality that originally made the coinage of this term necessary has not changed and is not likely to do so in the future.

As immigration continues, the demographic composition of the USA keeps changing in the direction of diversity. The 1990 Census attests that 25% of the American population has "minority" origin. By 2050, the four major "official" minority groups--African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans--will make up 47% of the entire population (W.P. O'Hare: *American Minorities: The Demographics of Diversity*, Population Reference Bureau, 1992). Obviously, the school system is going to be affected directly by this demographic pattern, particularly in view of the concentration of certain minority groups--notably those of Hispanic and Asian origin--in a limited number of states. Several of the largest school systems are already dealing with a situation of "majority minority" populations.

Indeed, the needs created by current and projected demographic changes are so

urgent that one reads current discussions of multiculturalism in growing disbelief that so little is being done so late. Meanwhile, the anthropologists sit bewildered, wondering why they never were consulted on a matter on which they obviously have something relevant to say. But do they? Does the American definition of multiculturalism involve any real interest in culture?

Judging from the educational strategies being developed--especially in terms of curricular changes in post-secondary education--culture does not play a large role. Rather, multiculturalism seems only to generate attempts at increasing the "curricular visibility" of underrepresented groups, be they women, people with disabilities, members of particular religious groups, or ethnic minorities. What is missing is any attempt to enable students to understand the cultural context or cultural content of ethnic groups, the anthropological perspective that would help students better understand the multicultural society developing all around them.

CULTURAL MINDFULNESS

While most students respond with enthusiasm to the assigned exercises of micro-behavioral analysis aimed at identifying their own ethnic-specific patterns of behavior, a few students feel that a long family history of inter-ethnic marriage has so complicated their heritage that no clear-cut ethnic style can be identified. As a consequence, these students often tell me--with great sadness--that conducting the exercises would be useless. When I point out that self-analysis exercises always reveal patterns and that, in their case, these may document their "Americanness" rather than a specific ethnic heritage, they look at me with both disbelief and hope. By the end of the semester, only a few of these students manage to overcome their skepticism about the reality of an overarching American culture and document its impact on their own expressive style. All of them, however, acquire a measure of "cultural mindfulness," and as their minds become more discriminating in matters of

cultural/ethnic diversity, they seem to get inoculated against discrimination.

CONCLUSION

The belief that a distinctive American culture does not exist is so widespread among Americans that I would say it constitutes a core aspect of the national ideology. This ideology has traditionally emphasized ethnicity as something "one becomes truly American by losing," creating a double cultural denial that boosts "rugged individualism" while contributing markedly to the weak sense of identity from which many Americans suffer. My classes often end up being a setting in which people develop strategies for overcoming their sense of ethnic and cultural deprivation. It is encouraging to see that, as these strategies develop, some attempts are made at analyzing the ethnic or cultural roots for the behavioral style of relevant others, a comparative framework is created, and hypotheses are advanced for possible reasons for interpersonal clashes.

The net result of this process is bewilderment, followed by awe, followed by a renewed sense of understanding, in turn leading to at least potential tolerance, respect, and acceptance. At the end of the course, some students thank me, while others express a certain amount of concern for having triggered a "cultural mindfulness" they are not sure they want or can handle. Still others ask me how they can pass on their new awareness of "what makes people tick" to others, especially their children. I often wonder what might be achieved if we "anthropologized" the K-12 curriculum and spread the belief that ethnic diversity is interesting, stimulating and precious.

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